

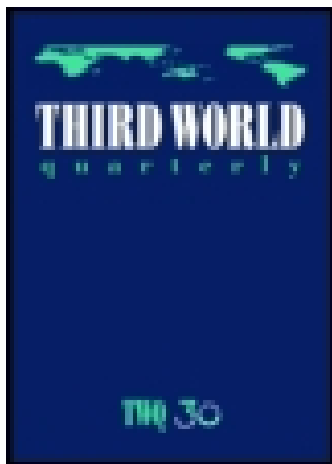
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### Dilemmas of agrarian communism: Peasant differentiation, sectoral and village politics

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# Dilemmas of agrarian communism: peasant differentiation, sectoral and village politics

The centrality of peasant rebellion to communist revolution in the twentieth century,<sup>1</sup> has obscured the tension between class-differentiated peasant interests and communist programmes. The central communist dilemma in democratic India is well understood—insurrection vs parliamentarianism.<sup>2</sup> Having accepted the parliamentary path, agrarian communism faces the profound dilemma of finding strategies to cope with capitalist agriculture.

Resolution of the land question has a strategic and tactical component. Since Lenin, leftist agrarian theory has explicitly recognised a contradiction between the tactical imperative of promising land to the underclasses and the strategic threat that successful land reform will conservatise precisely those classes which form the tactical roots of mobilisation.<sup>3</sup> In landlord-tenant systems that are important in areas of greatest communist electoral success in India (Kerala and West Bengal), both the classic dilemma of conservatising the tenantry and the position of numerically dominant agricultural labourers in agrarian policy confound the left. The labourers are the truly 'awkward class'.

The logic of embourgeoisement is not restricted to a leftist project; it is intermittently promoted by the right. Samuel Huntington summarised a distinguished lineage of social scientific lore underpinning conservative use of land reform by domestic elites in crisis and international elites concerned with 'containing communism': 'No social group is more conservative than a land-owning peasantry, and none is more revolutionary than a peasantry which owns too little land or pays too high a

<sup>1</sup> E Wolf, *Peasant Wars of the Twentieth Century*, New York: Harper & Row, 1969.

<sup>2</sup> B Gupta, *Communism in Indian Politics*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1972; TV Sathyamurthy, *India Since Independence: studies in the development of the power of the state*, Volume I, *Centre-State Relations: the case of Kerala*, Delhi: Ajanta, 1985.

<sup>3</sup> R Herring, *Land to the Tiller: the political economy of agrarian reform in South Asia*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983, chapters 3 and 6.

rental'.<sup>4</sup> This Janus-faced character of the peasantry is widely recognised in social theory and realpolitik. Conservatising land reform is explicitly promoted by that strand of US foreign policy which seeks to apply lessons from the 'loss of China' to eradicate the 'breeding grounds' of communism in poor societies from Vietnam to El Salvador.<sup>5</sup>

Land reform thus presents the agrarian left with a double-edged sword: an issue that mobilises the poor but simultaneously threatens to destroy the very social-structural niche which effectuates that mobilisational potential. Agrarian communism in India has diverged along these lines of analysis and opportunity. Kerala's communists recognised the threat of embourgeoisement but pressed for two decades to abolish the landlord-tenant nexus with a land-to-the-tiller reform.<sup>6</sup> That the party has been able periodically to win elections (1980, 1987) in coalition after loss of a section of its agrarian base says more about the opposition in Kerala than about resolution of agrarian dilemmas.

Electoral communism in West Bengal averted the conservatising threat of embourgeoisement. Rejecting land-to-the-tiller, Bengal's party settled for the land policy of conservative regimes: tenancy reform.<sup>7</sup> The crucial difference politically is that tenants remain dependent on political-administrative means to retain proprietary claims. The *bargadar* of Bengal remains secure in the possession of land and payment of below-market rents only so long as the state sides with tenants rather than landlords. Decentralisation of authority to *panchayats* (village councils) locates sharecroppers' interests in continuation of the party's control at both state and local levels.

This is not the place to speculate on causes of the Kerala-Bengal divergence. However, agrarian radicalism in Kerala began earlier than in Bengal; tenant grievances figured prominently in the Mappilla 'outrages' of the nineteenth century.<sup>8</sup> Landlordism as a social system of oppression imposed more severe indignities on subordinate classes in Kerala and thus provoked a more comprehensive revolutionary programme.<sup>9</sup> Ruined tenants who were structurally akin to middle

<sup>4</sup> S Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968, p 375.

<sup>5</sup> R Prosterman and J Riedinger, *Land Reform and Democratic Development*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987, chapters 5 and 6; A McCoy, 'Land Reform as Counter-Revolution: US foreign policy and the tenant', *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars* 3(1) 1971.

<sup>6</sup> R Herring, *Land to the Tiller*, chapters 6 and 7.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, chapter 2.

<sup>8</sup> W Logan, *A Malabar Manual*, Trivandrum: Charithram, 1887/1981, pp 641-97.

<sup>9</sup> R Herring, 'Stealing Congress Thunder: the rise to power of a communist movement in South India,' in P Merkl and K Lawson (eds), *When Parties Fail*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988.

peasants, rather than urban intellectuals, were more likely to be local leaders of the mass organisations before Independence. Communists in Kerala did not face the mass repression which occurred in West Bengal in the early 1970s; the party was manipulated, undermined and dismissed by Delhi,<sup>10</sup> but not slaughtered wholesale. The Bengali party can somewhat legitimately claim that retention of office (not power) necessitated compromises which were unnecessary in Kerala. No matter how badly *bargadars* fare in comparison with Kerala's *kudiyaans*, they fare better with the left in power than under Congress control of the police and bureaucracy. The Bengali communist strategy thus weights heavily retention of office for the objective of creating political space within which organisations and individuals of the agrarian underclass can operate with more freedom; agrarian policy channels underclass interests toward their electoral programme.

Politically, the West Bengal strategy escapes embourgeoisement and reproduces dependency (more on the party than on landlords, though the latter remains in evidence).<sup>11</sup> It remains unclear how redistributive Operation Barga (registration of share tenants and *de jure* reduction of rents) has been. Virtually all the classic problems of regulation of tenancy<sup>12</sup> have appeared to various degrees: intimidation and failure to register tenancies, continuation of illegally high rents, dependence on landlords for consumption loans, and exclusion of the labourers.<sup>13</sup> Ashok Rudra concluded: 'if anything, the *Bargadars* have suffered a setback in terms of their income.'<sup>14</sup> Consistent with the political dependency interpretation is the fact that the CPI(M) (Communist Party of India—Marxist) has enhanced its rural position electorally while losing urban support.

Land reforms in Kerala redistributed income dramatically to tenants, but simultaneously accentuated contradictions within the agrarian left.

<sup>10</sup> T Sathyamurthy, *India Since Independence*, Volume I.

<sup>11</sup> Compare with A Rudra, 'One step forward, two steps backwards', *Economic and Political Weekly* (Bombay) SVI:25/26, June 1981, pp A61–A68.

<sup>12</sup> R Herring, *Land to the Tiller*, chapters 2 and 3.

<sup>13</sup> Interviews with Commissioner, Land Reforms, D Bandyopadhyaya and Joint Secretary, L M Ray, Calcutta, June 1980. Less critical assessments are found in T K Ghosh, *Operation Barga and Land Reforms*, Delhi: B R Publishing Corporation, 1986, and A Kohli, *The State and Poverty in India*, Cambridge University Press, 1987, chapter 3. More critical evaluations, based on extensive field work, are A Rudra, 'One step forward, two steps backwards'; A Basu, 'Dilemmas of radical reform: parliamentary communism: West Bengal', Amherst, Massachusetts: Amherst College, 1986; S Bandyopadhyaya and D Von Eschen, 'The impact of politics on rural production and distribution', Association for Asian Studies, Annual Meetings, San Francisco, 1988; Bandyopadhyaya *et al*, *Evaluation of Land Reform Measures in West Bengal*, Bangkok: ILO/ARTEP, 1985.

<sup>14</sup> A Rudra, 'One step forward, two steps backwards', p A65.

Market logic holds that agriculture is a business; wages paid must at the margin yield something more than revenue product, whatever the consequences for the subsistence of labourers. I call this secondary dilemma Marshallian because it pits the moral economy of newly landed farmers adopting market capitalism directly against the subsistence claims of labourers. The response of communists in Kerala has been twofold: first, to create structures of local corporatism to prevent this contradiction from leading to unmanageable class warfare, and secondly to displace the conflict into the distributive and federal arenas. The first response subordinated trade unionism to tactical politics. The second has attempted to deflect the contradiction to redefining federalism in favour of the states where distribution takes precedence over accumulation. Populism—in the sense of generalised distribution to an undifferentiated outgroup to maintain legitimacy—has joined strands of social democratic mobilisation which replaced Leninism as dominant communist tactics in India. Exploitation comes to be analysed in sectoral or regional terms, in contrast to the class-focused moral outrage of the historical movement organised around ‘death to landlordism’. One strand of populism constitutes a third dilemma of agrarian communism: sectoral politics.

Rigging the terms of trade in favour of agriculture could blunt the class contradiction between agrarian capital and labour. Capital has no problem with a high-wage/high-profit system, and should be pleased with the aggregate impact on realisation of profits through the effect on aggregate demand. In theory, higher prices should stimulate more investment, growth and surplus. The model is social democracy: a marriage of regulated capitalism for producers and welfarism for consumers. The critical departure from the European model is the size of the sector that needs to be subsidised. Sri Lanka’s experience with wholesale subsidies demonstrates that progress in alleviating malnutrition is possible but difficult to sustain, particularly in the absence of the means to increase the rate of accumulation.<sup>15</sup> This constitutes a fourth dilemma for electoral communism: if the bourgeoisie is to be hobbled in its historic mission, how does the party utilise the state for accumulation?

### Land reforms and class structure in Kerala

The agrarian crisis of Kerala has been and remains more severe than

<sup>15</sup> R Herring, ‘Economic Liberalization Policies in Sri Lanka: international pressures and constraints’, *Economic and Political Weekly* 22(8) 1987.

that of India generally, and by ecological measurement approaches Bangladesh. Population density is three times the Indian average; levels of landlessness, tenancy and underemployment have historically been the highest in India.<sup>16</sup> Because of these structural-ecological conditions, mass movements associated with the left have been well developed by subcontinental standards.<sup>17</sup> Kerala elected the first state-level communist government (in 1957). Partly because of the strength and duration of leftist mobilisation and the resulting budgetary priorities, Kerala's developmental record on basic human needs is anomalous; despite a per capita income below the national mean, Kerala exhibits the best record in India for infant mortality rate, life expectancy, and literacy.<sup>18</sup>

Kerala's success in implementing fairly radical reforms in comparative terms is widely acknowledged.<sup>19</sup> Palghat district is of particular interest because the agrarian system was affected by land reforms to an extent matched by few other districts. Two village samples are discussed in this article—Nallepilli in Chittur Taluk and Kavasseri II (Padoor) in Alathur Taluk—though Nallepilli is highlighted because Chittur is the base of the most contentious farmers' organisation, the Deshiya Karshaka Samajam (DKS), which has been instrumental in promoting legal battles, political opposition, and physical violence directed against the legislation being discussed. The decade 1970–80, during which agrarian reforms were completed, is the major focus of this analysis. References to the sample mean formal interviews from a randomly-selected sample of 105 households in the Nallepilli *panchayat*.<sup>20</sup> The text also draws on extensive unstructured interviews with local labour and peasant leaders, government officers, politicians, and a cross-section of the unsampled village population. The 'farmer's sample' is a separate sample of one hundred farmers from Chittur, Alathur, and Palghat Taluks, selected on the basis of their local reputation as respected agriculturalists.

<sup>16</sup> H Hart and R Herring, 'Political conditions of Land Reform: Kerala and Maharashtra', in R E Frykenberg (ed), *Land Tenure and Peasant in South Asia*, Delhi: Orient Longman, 1977.

<sup>17</sup> R Herring, 'Stealing Congress Thunder'.

<sup>18</sup> M Morris and M McAlpin, *Measuring the Condition of India's Poor*, New Delhi: Promilla, 1982; Kerala, State Planning Board, *Economic Review*, Trivandrum, 1986, Appendix 10.8; A R Rouyer, 'Political Capacity and the Decline of Fertility in India', *American Political Science Review* 81(2) 1987, p 459.

<sup>19</sup> For example, R Prosterman and J Riedinger, *Land Reform and Democratic Development*, p 114.

<sup>20</sup> From a randomly chosen ward in each *panchayat*, house numbers from the census tract were used to select every fourth household, beginning with a number selected by two coin tosses. Randomisation produced few difficulties in locating households, but raised doubts of villagers as to why I took more interest in some households than others in a seemingly inexplicable pattern. Selection criteria for villages are too complex to report here.

Dynamics of the Nallepilli site in particular raise broader issues in the debate *within* the equity-with-growth developmental paradigm between extensive redistribution of assets and various forms of 'regulated capitalism'.<sup>21</sup> The asset-redistributive argument is that 'trickle-down' mechanisms work poorly if at all, and leak public resources badly. The oppositional argument is that asset redistribution is politically impracticable and economically disruptive; the poor can benefit from a regulated capitalism which retains its dynamism but sheds its cruelty. Kerala is preeminent in implementing both strategies. Land reforms profoundly altered the asset structure, abolishing ground rent and landlordism, and vesting lands in the tenants. But tenants were not the weakest agrarian class; responses to the much larger class of agricultural labourers have been through regulation of capitalism, granting their long-standing claims to greater security on the land, freedom from arbitrary abuse by landed superiors, and a larger share of the surplus from the land—claims structurally isomorphic to those of the tenantry. The evidence from Nallepilli demonstrates concretely the dilemmas of regulated capitalism: a stalemated class conflict which permits, perhaps aggravates, immiserisation of the labourers.

Abolition of landlordism transferred more than 40 per cent of the operated area to tenants; land above the lowest ceiling in the region was appropriated for redistribution. House and garden sites have been transferred extensively to labourers. The agrarian class structure, historically one of the most complex in India, has been substantially simplified, despite persistent and legitimate critiques that the reforms did little for the most depressed class, the agricultural labourers, whose position has deteriorated.<sup>22</sup> The agrarian structure of Nallepilli conformed to the formal-legal structure mandated on 1 January 1970, a finding quite at variance with village studies in most of South Asia. There were no rentiers and essentially no tenants. Experientially, the

<sup>21</sup> Compare with V Dandekar and N Rath, *Poverty in India*, Poona: Gokhole Institute of Politics and Economics, 1971; Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR), *Alternatives in Agricultural Development*, New Delhi, Fifteen Volumes, 1980; P C Joshi, 'Perspectives on Agrarian Reconstruction: India in the Asian context,' *Mainstream* 16 (21–22) (Republic Day) 1978; R Herring, 'Economic Consequences of Local Power Configuration in South Asia', in Desai, Rudolph and Rudra (eds), *Agrarian Power and Agricultural Productivity in South Asia*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1984.

<sup>22</sup> Compare with J P Mencher, 'Agrarian relations in two rice regions of Kerala, *Economic and Political Weekly* 14 (9) 1978; J P Mencher, 'The Lessons and Non-Lessons of Kerala: agricultural labourers and poverty', *Economic and Political Weekly* 15 (41–3) 1980; N Krishnaji, 'Agrarian Relations and the Left Movement in Kerala', *Economic and Political Weekly* 13 (6–7) 1979; R J Herring, 'Abolition of Landlordism in Kerala: a redistribution of privilege', *Economic and Political Weekly* 15 (26) 1980; K Kannan, *Of Rural Proletarian Struggles*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1988, chapter 6.



class structure was bimodal: everyone was identified as landowner (*krishikaran*) or labourer (*koolikaran*).

Though the rentiers as a class have been eliminated, critiques speak of new landlords<sup>23</sup>—the former tenants; at a theoretical level the dominant communist party distinguishes between feudal and capitalist landlords.<sup>24</sup> But the term landlord is a conceptual distortion. The real lords of the land—the *jenmies*—are no longer in control; many live in genteel poverty on decaying estates. New owners, however large their holdings, are not lords of the land; power *vis-à-vis* the labourers is the power of capital, not of dyadic authority and servitude. Though *krishikars* are not landlords, most retain the traditional disdain for manual labour characteristic of landlordism. Though 'peasants' in CPI(M) theory, most landowners in the sample did not work on their farms. Those who claimed to work admitted that participation was typically limited to supervision of labourers. A more telling account may be taken from the responses of the permanent labourers—those attached by law to a single patch of land, who must be employed whenever agricultural operations are done on that land and who thus always work for the same owner. In about 94 per cent of their responses, the landowners were reported as doing nothing other than supervision (often quite perfunctory); the modal formulation was that 'they are only standing on the *bund*' (embankment, *varambu*).

Agrarian reform altered the property structure, but relations in production were little changed. About 89 per cent of the permanent labourers said that landholders did only supervision before the reforms; after the reforms, 94 per cent. Though small, the entire change was accounted for by former tenants. For some tenants, new rights created the opportunity to raise their status by ceasing to labour in the muck of paddy fields. The owner who stands on the *bund*, typically shaded by an umbrella, is spatially and symbolically removed from the filth and nakedness which universally signify the inferiority of manual labour. Former tenants are derisively called '1-1-70s' (after the effective date of the reforms) or *mashuris* (after the local HYV [High Yielding Variety] paddy which enhanced their prosperity). Though newly-landed former tenants were somewhat more likely than longer-established owners to invest in the land, as per received theory,<sup>25</sup> the modal perception of labourers about what tenants did with the surplus was: 'they ate it.'

<sup>23</sup> For example, see J Mencher, 'Agrarian Relations in Two Rice Regions of Kerala'.

<sup>24</sup> Communist Party of India—Marxist (CPI-M), *Central Committee Resolution on Certain Agrarian Issues and An Explanatory Note* by P Sundarayya (Calcutta), 1973.

<sup>25</sup> R Herring, *Land to the Tiller*, chapter 9.

Former tenant households were easy to spot on the ground, typically by the half-finished or new tile roofs of their homes or other signs of conspicuous consumption typical of a new rich stratum. More than two-thirds of landholders in the sample were former tenants, averaging 5.5 acres of wet land (paddy fields) per beneficiary, and 2.2 acres of dry land. Though small holders by international standards, tenant beneficiaries are distinctly privileged in a state in which almost 90 per cent of all holdings are less than 2.5 acres.<sup>26</sup>

Only 12 per cent of the labourers received land, and in such small plots—averaging 0.88 acres wet and 0.63 acres dry—that their class status remained the same, objectively and subjectively. Labourers were bitter (*vishamam*) about this result. Of those who did not receive land, about 95 per cent said they had not benefited in any way from the reforms, despite decades of support for the communist agrarian movement. In the long and costly mobilisation to overthrow landlordism, labourers were explicitly promised that the social surplus would be shared. The party's rallying cry, along with 'death to landlordism', was then 'agriculturalists and labourers are one'. Tenants were not eager to share their gains, pleading poverty. Land reforms thus set in motion new class conflicts, objectively dividing the left movement on the issue of who benefits from the appropriation of the rentiers' traditional share of the social surplus—Eric Wolf's 'rent fund'.<sup>27</sup> Left unity was threatened both by economic conflicts over disposition of the rent fund and the political effects of embourgeoisement.

### Embourgeoisement from the perspective of the local party

The first agitation in Palghat on separate goals of labourers was in 1953, when the communist peasant association (Kerala Karshaka Sanghom, or KKS) adopted the cause of female workers who were denied the right to cover their breasts.<sup>28</sup> Reflecting decades of agitation, the 1953 Amendment to the Malabar Tenancy Act had conceded many tenant demands. Fearing their desertion, the party launched the Malabar Karshaka Thozhilali (Agricultural Workers) Union. Mobilisation of labourers and peasants proceeded in unison until the unions began independent actions in 1970–71. Unions had been strengthened during

<sup>26</sup> Kerala, Department of Economics and Statistics, *Report on the Agricultural Census 1980–81*, Trivandrum, 1988, p 13.

<sup>27</sup> E R Wolf, *Peasants*, Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1966.

<sup>28</sup> P Nayar, 'Agrarian Movements in Rural Development: a case study', typescript, Kariavattom: University of Kerala, 1979, p 43.

the communist-led ministry (1967–69) and by subsequent agitations to implement land reforms. Wage militancy was increased by consciousness that tenants were no longer paying rent (typically more than half the gross produce) and had surplus to share. Militancy was enhanced as well because the demise of landlordism demonstrated concretely that the awesome power of the *jenmis*, to whom tenants had paid such abject obeisance, could be destroyed by political struggles and public policy; the power of the ‘new *jenmis*’ did not seem awesome in comparison.

The December Resolution of the combined peasant and labourer associations in 1970 sanctioned mass implementation of the land reforms without regard for ‘legal niceties’. Labourers fenced compounds and harvested the produce; ‘surplus’ land (believed to be in excess of the ceiling) was occupied. By 1972–73 labour militancy had developed beyond the expectation, and control, of the party. Disruptions in production from violent wage struggles, mass meetings and demonstrations seriously alienated farmers. The local party sympathised with the militancy of the labourers in recognition of their contributions; nevertheless, after the harvest strike of 1973, the district party called a meeting of farmer, labourer, and student organisations and decided that agrarian militancy had to be more carefully targeted and controlled to preserve unity.<sup>29</sup>

Desertion of tenants from the left was driven by altered property relations and wage struggles; in the words of the CPI(M) district secretary, ‘they needed a new party to protect their new interests’. Attendance at KKS meetings dwindled; the secretary noted that the absentees were the larger tenants (roughly five acres and above). The Deshiya Karshaka Samajam (DKS) simultaneously ‘grew like yeast’. At the district level, all eleven assembly constituencies were won by the CPI in 1960 after dismissal of the first communist ministry when agrarian mobilisation to protect the land reform was high; by the mid-1970s less than half that number were returned. At a micro-level, a prosperous tenant of Alathur Taluk noted that the desertion by farmers (including himself) in his ward was complete. Before the 1973 harvest strike, the ward had been 100 per cent communist; the *panchayat* representative had received a medal from the party for performance. After the strike, all the farmers and about one-fourth of the labourers turned away from the party. The labourers who deserted—typically those most in

<sup>29</sup> In addition to author’s interviews, these sections are based on police files on agrarian violence, memoranda from the District Collector to higher authorities and labour department circulars, as well as P Nayar, ‘Agrarian Movements in Rural Development’.

need of consumption loans—joined the Congress (I) INTUC union branch; Indira Gandhi's state of emergency (1975–77) simultaneously increased the attractiveness of Congress (I) to farmers through its effect on labour discipline. Party leaders disagree on the significance and permanence of losses from embourgeoisement. Those with historical perspective and dialectical logic dismiss the rapid emergence of class militancy among landowners as expressed by the DKS; their assumption is that no other party can represent the class interests of farmers in the long run. But the DKS arose because of class conflict which directly engaged the interests of landowners; support for militancy by the labourers directly increases the attractiveness of conservative parties and organizations to farmers, precisely *because* of their class interests. The multi-class coalition based on potential expropriation of the rent fund disappeared with landlordism. Moreover, party pessimists argue that the former tenants were more important to the party than their numbers would indicate, both financially and in terms of the local influence they wielded.

Precise measurement of tenant desertion is impossible. Though something of an ecological fallacy, it is true that the party has declined in its historical stronghold of Malabar, where land reforms struck deep and has partially compensated where land reforms were less important. Former tenants were reluctant to discuss their own politics, but acknowledged that desertion was common. Many countered that the party had first deserted them—by becoming 'the party of the labourers' or 'anti-farmer'. Some sense of local perceptions of shifts in loyalty among former tenants can be gained from a survey conducted by the author in 1980 after the Assembly elections which brought the communists back into government as leaders of the Left Democratic Front.

As Table 1 illustrates, at least a plurality in all cases supported the embourgeoisement interpretation, labourers more strongly than farmers. Even more strongly, the labourers affirmed in a separate question that the historical unity of labourers and landholders had been destroyed after land reforms. Farmers generally had a less opportunistic interpretation of political allegiance. Some stressed decline in the quality of local communist leadership (which is real).<sup>30</sup> Others mentioned the loss of monopoly by the CPI(M); whereas the KKS was previously the only active peasant association, now most parties have both farmer and labourer organisations. Explanations centred on local caste considerations were conspicuous by their relative infrequency.

<sup>30</sup> See R Herring, 'Stealing Congress Thunder', pp 413–15.

Table 1

*Political Effects of Embourgeoisement*

'Has the desertion of tenants after land reforms reduced the CPI(M) vote?'

(Percentages)

	Nallepilli		Padoor		Farmer Sample
	Labourers	Farmers	Labourers	Farmers	Farmers
Yes	61	47	85	66	52
No	3	42	4	22	24
Don't Know	36	11	11	11	24

Cumulative N = 307

Resolution of emerging conflicts around the bitterness and militancy of labour took the form of new public policy, most importantly the Kerala Agricultural Workers Act (KAWA) of 1974, bitterly referred to by leaders of the militant DKs as 'the factory acts'. The central provision was permanency of employment for attached labourers; there was also a Provident Fund for labour, to which farmers had to contribute, permanent conciliation machinery at the district level, greatly reduced hours of work, scheduled breaks for rest, tea and lunch, an employment register to be kept on the farm, and revision of the minimum wage. Its provisions now structure the conflict between land and labour.

**Wages vs profits: the 'Factory Acts'**

Jeffrey Paige, following Stinchcombe,<sup>31</sup> argues that agrarian systems of the landlord-tenant type necessarily produce patterns of conflict quite different from those of family-farm systems. Conflict in a landlord-tenant system may assume revolutionary forms—attacks on property institutions and class structure and its associated political expression of authority and power. To the extent that one considers electoral communism revolutionary, these predictions are borne out by the association of the communist vote with high extents of tenancy and landlessness in India and within Kerala.<sup>32</sup> Family-farm systems are

<sup>31</sup> J Paige, *Agrarian Revolution: social movements and export agriculture in the underdeveloped world*, New York: Free Press, 1975; A Stinchcombe, 'Agricultural Enterprise and Rural Class Relations', *American Journal of Sociology*, 67 (September), 1961.

<sup>32</sup> D S Zagoria, 'The ecology of peasant communism in India', *American Political Science Review* 65, 1971, pp 144-60; K G Krishna Murthy and G Rao, *Political Preferences in Kerala*, New Delhi: Radhakrishna Prakashan, 1968.

characterised by conflict not over property, but over the terms of exchange between the agricultural sector and other sectors, the archetypal form being a 'commodity reform movement' concerned with prices of inputs and outputs.

Commodity reform movements are an increasingly important political phenomenon in India,<sup>33</sup> and in Palghat. But in the classic family-farm system wage labour is of relatively small significance. In Palghat, even more than Kerala generally, agricultural labourers are the largest class, outnumbering cultivators by more than three to one. The agrarian configuration includes an important structural feature of plantation systems: a large class of wage-earners of similar social standing and close association in the labour process.<sup>34</sup> As in Paige's archetypal plantation system, labourers are mobilised politically along proletarian reformist—not peasantist revolutionary—lines: unions pressing for higher wages and better working conditions, rather than an overthrow of the property system.

This conflict configuration is determined partially by economic structure, but also by the political tactics of dominant leftist parties and resulting public policies. Partly in recognition of the impossibility of turning landless labourers into peasants through redistribution—because of the lowest per capita land availability in India (1.03 acres per person engaged in agriculture in 1971), and because of the tactical pressures of maintaining a united agrarian movement—communists have recognised the claims of workers as proletarians, not as aspiring peasants. The result has been unique legislation and wage increases relative to productivity which had been the highest in India.

The organisational impetus for this outcome was the decision by the CPI-M to create a separate organisation for labourers, dividing the agrarian left organisationally as the land reforms were doing so structurally. In 1965–66, there were 50 registered agricultural labour unions, and 37 registered disputes; by 1976–77, 205 unions and 4,279 disputes, despite the national state of emergency of Indira Gandhi during which labour militancy was quashed. In 1967–68, of the total number of person-days lost to strikes and lockouts in Kerala, the plantation sector accounted for 10.6 per cent while non-plantation agriculture contributed only 0.02 per cent, despite the numerical dominance of non-plantation labourers. By 1976–77, the figures were reversed; plant-

<sup>33</sup> M V Nadkarni, *Farmers' Movements in India*, New Delhi: Allied, 1987.

<sup>34</sup> Compare with Thanjavur, discussed in M Bouton, *Agrarian Radicalism in South India*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985, p 293.

ation sector disputes contributed 16 per cent of the total; non-plantation agriculture, 26.7 per cent.<sup>35</sup> The combination of new legislation and organisational development produced a congruence between the plantation and non-plantation sectors in terms of level and form of conflict. Paige argues that economistic wage struggles on plantations divert labour from revolutionary politics because of opportunities for wage concessions through capital deepening. Such opportunities are extremely limited in paddy agriculture. The outcome in Palghat is instead a stalemated class conflict in which neither class has sufficient power to win decisively. Capital has lost much of its traditional control of the labour process, but retains strategic powers which limit the capacity of labour.

Palghat farmers complain that produce prices are too low, and wages too high. Revision of the minimum wage was posted in 1975; by 1980, the price of a cartload of paddy had fallen by more than a third. Wages were not only 'sticky downwards', but legally stuck. The KAWA provides that if the prevailing wage is higher than the notified minimum, it becomes the minimum wage. The ratchet effect is legally institutionalised. The farmers' lament reflects the classic vulnerability of small producers in a competitive, unpredictable market, aggravated by inability to reduce a major cost; wages are about half the cost of production locally. The traditional strategy for absorbing the shock of price fluctuations was to transfer a large share of risk to labourers by shifting the kind-cash composition of wages. In periods of extreme scarcity (eg 1967–68) when paddy prices were high, farmers refused to pay wages in kind, as was traditional, despite labour protests. When paddy prices were low, as in 1980, farmers preferred to pay in kind. The KAWA reduces the ability of farmers to manipulate real wages to their advantage. Caught in a cost-price squeeze, farmer associations, including the communist KKS, demanded either higher procurement prices or greater subsidies for input costs or, preferably, both.

The farmers' lament on the cost/price squeeze is, like their romanticised perception of paternalism before land reforms, part truth and part fiction—in short, an ideology. Farmers complain that labourers in adjacent states receive half Kerala's minimum wage, though paddy prices are the same. But a more telling comparison is that farmers in adjacent districts of Kerala somehow manage to pay even higher wages on fields with significantly (almost 50 per cent) lower yields (see Table

<sup>35</sup> Kerala, Labour Department, *Administration Reports: Industrial Tribunals and Labour Court*, Trivandrum, annual.

Table 2  
*Comparative Wages and Yields: Palghat, Adjacent Districts and Kerala State*<sup>36</sup>

Year	Paddy Yields (kg/hectare—Virippu season)			
	Palghat	Malappuram	Trichur	Kerala State
1975	3095	2115	1761	2242
1976–77	2617	1516	1479	2038
1977–78	3435	1939	1526	2300
1978–79	3085	2103	1903	1388
1980–81	3232	1898	1855	2413
1981–82	3440	1820	1719	2442
1982–83	3560	1687	1966	2571
1983–84	3040	1726	2144	2417
1984–85	3455	1945	1823	2623

Year	Wages (Rs/day): Paddy Labourers							
	Palghat		Malappuram		Trichur		Kerala State	
	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F
1960–61	1.45	NA	—	—	1.97	—	1.85	—
1970–71	4.05	NA	—	—	5.61	—	5.09	—
1976–77	6.18	5.09	8.63	6.19	8.50	5.38	8.44	5.89
1977–78	6.35	5.35	9.75	6.65	8.50	5.38	8.67	6.06
1978–79	6.75	5.75	10.00	6.81	8.88	5.80	8.99	6.26
1979–80	7.15	5.77	10.00	7.17	10.09	6.96	9.58	6.68
1980–81	—	—	—	—	—	—	11.13	7.91
1981–82	9.08	6.89	13.31	8.71	14.40	9.27	12.74	8.83
1982–83	9.79	8.00	14.13	9.33	14.75	10.42	13.29	9.55
1983–84	12.46	9.08	15.16	11.46	17.04	11.79	15.86	11.02
1984–85	—	—	—	—	—	—	23.60	11.89
1985–86	—	—	—	—	—	—	26.08	15.10

*M* = male, *F* = female.

2). Paddy prices are quite volatile; the big jump in wages (1973–75) coincided with escalating paddy prices and the temporary windfall of land reforms—tenants ceased paying rent but had not yet begun paying compensation. For a brief time, the promise of the communist movement was fulfilled—the rent fund was divided between tenants and labourers, but at great cost to left unity because of the extreme militancy whereby labourers won higher wages.

<sup>36</sup> Source: Kerala, Department of Economics and Statistics, *Statistics for Planning*, Trivandrum, 1986, Table II, 25; *Statistics for Planning*, 1980, Tables 9.6, 4.11; Kerala, *Report on Wage Structure Survey*, Trivandrum, 1987.



A second strain in the lament is less familiar in the classical commodity reform movement: farmers complain that they are losing control of the labour process with a consequent decline in the *quality* of labour power which they purchase at higher unit prices. Farmers and labourers largely agreed that fundamental changes have occurred in the farmers' ability to extract quality labour power in a timely fashion. That there was a time when class and production relations were fundamentally different is understood by everyone, though social change proceeded unevenly, village by village, often field by field. Labourers mark two signposts: first, when 'flag-holding' became common (around the time of the first communist ministry); secondly, 'when tenants got the land' or when 'the rules were made' (1970–75).

Landowners' views of the past are consistent with a romanticised version of the academic patron-client model: relations with labour were distinctly personal and reciprocal, with diffuse obligations on both ends. Labourers were attached to a single landowner, on call for whatever work was demanded. Owners took a paternalistic interest in their labourers' welfare: for example, in the provision for illness; gifts on special occasions; intervention with police or enemies; emergency interest-free subsistence loans; income security for the aged. Labourers had different views of the terms of exchange. All agreed that small subsistence loans were made to attached labourers, and were sometimes forgiven; a majority received gifts. Other elements of diffuse obligation of patrons were contradicted. About nine out of ten labourers said no provisions for illness were made. My question concerning the old age insurance met bitter incredulity. Labourers were enthusiastic about the pension proclaimed by the Left Democratic Front in 1980, though the payments were minimal; Rs45 (US\$5.63) per month (revised to Rs60 in 1987) far exceeded the most generous treatment in the traditional system, and approached the average income of those still labouring in the fields.

In describing their prior condition, a number of labourers claimed to have been slaves. *Adima* has the same ambiguity as the English word slave; both are used as metaphors which dilute but resonate with the original meaning (as in English 'a slave to her husband', or 'wage slave'). One labourer noted that there had been no real slaves for decades, but *adima* was still appropriate—'we were born to work in the fields, and required to do so; even if there was a calamity in our house and the landlord called, we had to go.'

A great deal of the pre-reform moral economy is disputed along class

lines.<sup>37</sup> Landowners did not let healthy workers starve; gifts and loans constituting a significant consumption supplement were common. The materialist explanation offered by both owners and labourers was that without the supplements, the workers 'could not have survived'. Such supplements are an ideal factor payment system for land *vis-à-vis* labour: being discretionary, they can reward loyal and diligent workers and punish the recalcitrant; appearing to be voluntary, they reinforce paternalism as ideology. But dependency and fear emerge more strongly in labourers' accounts than paternalism and reciprocity. Commonly mentioned were fear of being denied employment, fear of eviction, beatings, house burnings, rape. One of the most important changes in production relations is that 'the fear is gone'. What is not disputed across classes is that the traditional labour-control system produced extraordinary discipline and flexibility in the utilisation of labour.

### Landowner strategies and dilemmas for labour

Agriculture is an enterprise in which production is especially sensitive to completion of certain operations within a critical time period; this is especially true of hydraulic paddy systems employing biologically advanced varieties. Delays in transplanting or harvesting significantly threaten yields. Irrigation operations frequently require pressing and continuous attention following excessive rains; crops may be damaged if channels are not cleared, drainage maintained, *bund* breaches quickly repaired. Before the KAWA, labourers had been on call twenty-four hours a day, and would often work through the night to control water or complete the harvest, using lanterns and torches.

The KAWA specifies a maximum work day of six to eight hours in contrast to the twelve hour days common a decade earlier. Farmers complain that they are paying more for a day's labour that consists of fewer hours while each hour of labour is of lower intensity and quality. Local job actions, district-level Industrial Relations Committee rulings, and court decisions, within the framework of the KAWA, have effectively deprived landowners of the power to make unilateral decisions about

<sup>37</sup> Despite some analytical confusion, the term 'moral economy' should connote opposition to *amoral*, not *immoral*. The core notion is that economic outcomes in pre-market society are evaluated by norms embedded in social relations generally; market-driven outcomes are in normative terms irrelevant, often inexplicable and unacceptable. The major theoretical statement is J Scott, *The Moral Economy of the Peasant*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976; the briefest possible summary is R Herring, review of Samuel Popkin, *The Rational Peasant*, *American Political Science Review* 74 (2) June 1980.

which specific labourers, and how many of them, are to be deployed per acre of land, over what time period, and for what operation.<sup>38</sup> Conflicts over attempts to reassert that traditional power have produced strikes and lockouts. Farmers can no longer use threats of unemployment to discipline permanent workers, or replace those who are weakening, old, or recalcitrant.

To contravene these effects, various tactics are tried. Some farmers attempt to import Tamil workers from Coimbatore, but there are logistical and legal constraints (for example, a High Court ruling in 1973), and local unions resist. A more radical response has been to resign from paddy cultivation altogether, either by selling out or by changing to less labour-intensive crops. Though significant changes in cropping patterns are occurring, typically to coconuts and sugar cane, there are agronomic constraints and risks; the Land Utilisation Act requires government approval to convert paddy fields (because of the chronic rice deficit). At the aggregate level, paddy acreage and production are declining significantly, contrary to the national trend, further reducing employment opportunities; gross area under paddy declined from 8.85 lakh acres in 1975–76 to 6.64 lakh acres in 1986–87 (*lakh* = 100,000).<sup>39</sup>

Some farmers try to substitute family labour for hired labour; here the 'new landlords' are in a superior position, as their experience and caste status more easily permit going into the fields.<sup>40</sup> This may be Chayanov's revenge, advantaging peasant-caste farmers with large families *vis-à-vis* their capitalist farmer neighbours, but the unions resist strenuously, especially at harvest. Farmers have been physically prevented from harvesting on their own lands, even when the resultant delays damage crops. Mechanisation has significantly reduced labour costs, but there are limits. In the flush of high prices in 1974–75 and the extra income from abolition of rental payments, and spurred by wage increases, former tenants in particular purchased tractors. The tractor population of the district increased by almost 200 per cent between 1972 and 1977. But with continuing inflation and depressed paddy prices, new tractors became uneconomic by the late 1970s. Tractor rental costs escalated from Rs25 per hour in 1973 to Rs60 in 1980. There have also been

<sup>38</sup> Kerala, *Report of the Committee Appointed by Government to Hold Enquiries and Advise Government in Respect of Fixation of Minimum Wages for Employment in Agricultural Operations in Kerala*, Trivandrum, 1977; Kerala, Labour Department, *Report of the Sub-committee Under the Palghat Agricultural Area*, No 1382/77/LD, Palghat, 1977.

<sup>39</sup> Kerala, Department of Economics and Statistics, *Statistics for Planning*, Trivandrum, 1986, Table 11.7; Kerala, Department of Economics and Statistics, *Report on the Survey of Unemployment in Kerala 1987*, Trivandrum, 1988, p 7.

<sup>40</sup> Compare with J Mencher, 'Agrarian relations in two rice regions of Kerala'.

instances of labourers' burning tractors, though Luddite impulses have been quelled by police intervention and are contrary to union policy.

Farmers have resisted permanency both through legal channels and on the ground—refusing to register labourers, attempting to replace striking permanent labourers, importing extra labourers to finish operations more quickly and selling or partitioning land. Labourers have responded through their unions and the Labour Department and this has led to some violent confrontations. The power of labour is such that a *proprietary* claim of the permanent labourers is now widely recognised in practice; upon sale or partition of land, owners are frequently forced to pay permanent labourers a solatium or percentage of the sales receipts (about one week's wages per year of service, depending on the bargaining power of the parties and value of the land). Farmers have reported increasing difficulty in selling land. The real price of local land declined slightly between 1970 and 1980, despite rising yields; farmers are convinced that labour troubles and the factory acts depressed land values.

Labour militancy and legal responses alienated farmers from the left, but the welfare of the labourers remains precarious. Because of seasonality of demand, their central problem is to obtain sufficient days of work per season to generate income adequate to tide the family over 'the hunger months' when there is little work in the fields. Since available work is limited by agro-ecological and technical constraints in conjunction with the size of the local work force, labourers try to raise the wage to a level sufficient to provide a subsistence income given average expected days of employment. There is a contradiction between these two imperatives; raising the wage rate induces farmers to hire less labour, assuming productivity cannot be proportionately increased.

This dilemma for labour was severe in Nallepilli. The average annual number of days of employment reported was just under ninety-nine, a figure which most labourers felt represented less than half the number necessary for adequate subsistence. The mean annual days of employment for permanent labourers was only marginally higher than that of non-permanent labourers. Almost three-quarters reported a decline in standard of living between 1970 and 1980, one-fifth an increase, and the remainder no change. Non-permanent labourers were slightly more likely to report a decline.

The primary reason for a declining standard of living is an interaction between fewer days of employment and a rate of inflation which far outstripped wage increases between 1970 and 1980 and barely caught

up thereafter (see Table 3). Despite the empirical difficulties of ascertaining annual income, there is good reason to believe the account of immiserisation. Almost 91 per cent of the labourers reported declining employment. Other studies in the area corroborate the general report of immiserisation of field workers.<sup>41</sup> For Kerala as a whole, the work participation rate declined from 1980/81 to 1986/87; rural unemployment now is 24.7 per cent, underemployment 14.6 per cent.<sup>42</sup> Available days of employment for agricultural labourers declined by 26 per cent for males and 30 per cent for females between 1963/64 and 1983/84.<sup>43</sup>

Almost half the labourers attributed declining employment to mechanisation: tractors and *kubotas* (power tillers, the Japanese brand name having become the Malayalam generic). Mechanisation especially affects high-wage employment for men in ploughing, but also reduces female employment in a variety of ways. These dynamics are especially pronounced because holdings are larger than the state mean; Palghat district has almost half the tractor population of Kerala. The second most frequently mentioned cause of declining employment was the wage increase: labourers felt that farmers were giving less work whenever possible to cut their wage bills, for example, by decreasing the number of weeding from three times a season to one. Included in miscellaneous reasons for declining employment were land partitions, changes in cropping patterns, increased fallow, permanency, population growth, and union activities. There was a clear perception that landowners were taking vindictive and punitive actions to retaliate for labour militancy. Though some labourers did not suffer from the general decline in living standards for idiosyncratic reasons (improvements in earner-dependent ratios, and so on), the general dilemma for labour was clear: the higher nominal wage rate, which itself barely met subsistence needs, was perceived by farmers to be in excess of the level necessary to maintain or increase traditional labour inputs per acre, given the farmers' perception of what constitutes an acceptable profit.

Labourers were not very sympathetic to the farmers' lament. Most believed that tenants got the land gratis, 'ate' the surplus (or drank it—a quasi-pun being that the *kudiyans* [tenants] have become *kudiyans*

<sup>41</sup> J P Mencher, 'The lessons and non-lessons of Kerala: agricultural labourers and poverty', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 15 (41-3) 1980; P G K Panikar, 'Employment, income and food intake among agricultural labour households', *EPW* 14(34) 25 August 1979; K P Kannan, *Of Rural Proletarian Struggles*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1988, chapter 6.

<sup>42</sup> Kerala, Department of Economics and Statistics, *Report on the Survey of Unemployment in Kerala 1987*, Table 2.5.

<sup>43</sup> Kerala, Department of Economics and Statistics, *Statistics for Planning*, 1986, xii.5.

Table 3  
*Consumer and Paddy Prices, Parity Index and Paddy Field Wages, Palghat District<sup>44</sup>*

	Paddy Prices (Rs/para)	Parity Index	CPI**	Wages (Male) (Rs/day)
1970-71	6.80	101*	100	4.05
1971-72	7.01	NA	NA	4.58
1972-73	8.22	NA	NA	4.88
1973-74	13.06	NA	NA	7.37
1974-75	16.42	109	NA	8.39
1975-76	11.99	95	170	6.94
1976-77	9.83	99	163	6.18
1977-78	9.12	102	164	6.35
1978-79	8.78	102	187	6.75
1979-80	9.32	96	213	7.15
1980-81	10.59	93	232	8.08
1981-82	12.43	87	248	9.08
1982-83	15.75	83	255	9.79
1983-84	19.43	103	294	12.46
1985	16.88	NA	309	NA
1986	18.00	NA	328	NA

One para = 2000 cu in or about 7.5kg

\* 1952/53 = 100 (prices of output/prices paid by farmers)

\*\* Consumer Price Index for Agricultural Labourers

[drunkards]), and exaggerate the cost-price squeeze. They call fertiliser 'Government manure' and believe it is free or virtually so. Prices of harvested paddy are well known, but the parity index which measures all costs in relation to output prices is not (see Table 3). Their perception that farmers were much better off after land reforms proceeds from evidence of a consumption binge by former tenants in particular and comparison with their own declining welfare. That an efficient five-acre farmer earns less than a peon in government service is simply irrelevant to them.

Some labourers fear that permanency has actually diminished security of employment for casual labourers; landowners are reluctant to employ the same labourers for the three consecutive harvests necessary to claim permanency. Retiring permanent workers are replaced by casual labour,

<sup>44</sup> Source: Kerala, Bureau of Economics and Statistics (Trivandrum and Palghat), *Season and Crop Report of Kerala State*, 1983-84, Trivandrum, 1986; *Economic Review*, 1986.

though the union claims that permanency is in effect heritable and passes to family members. The institution of permanency itself creates a structural division in the labourers class, just as security of tenure legislation historically divided the top from bottom rungs of the tenancy. There is, however, an indirectly political benefit to the permanent labourers—freedom from fear of termination—which should increase the potential for militancy. Permanent labourers are more likely to be union members, but the unions have reached a tactical cul-de-sac in solving their problems.

Even in theory, the KAWA cannot address the most serious problems facing labour; in practice, effective enforcement remains problematic. Labour officers are spread too thinly and have too little power to enforce the law; penalties for violation are extremely rare. Unions are critical to enforcement, as officers make few independent investigations. Palghat has one of the strongest unions in Kerala (which in turn has the strongest agrarian unions in India)<sup>45</sup> but there are political constraints. The Kerala State Karshaka Thozhilali Union (KSKTU) is organisationally linked to the CPI(M), and formulates tactics in consideration of the party's broader strategy. The CPI-M understands that its own rural support rests on a class-differentiated coalition and, more importantly, that it can rule only in coalition with parties to its right.<sup>46</sup> Extreme militancy in the early 1970s is understood to have alienated significant sectors of the 'peasantry'. Poorer farmers, those most likely to support the party, are precisely those whose Marshallian dilemma is most severe and most aggravated by higher wages. Locally, some wage concessions are made to smaller farmers,<sup>47</sup> but to the disadvantage of labourers on those farms. Partisan politics also enters because higher levels of the local party organisation include scions of landed families; some militants cynically observe that large farmers in areas of communist strength support the party to escape labour troubles.

Kerala has unique legislation favourable to agricultural workers because of the successful left mobilisation, electoral and otherwise, but

<sup>45</sup> The strongest union, the KSKTU, reported an annual membership of 50,750 in Palghat for 1979–80, more than double the figure for the year of the KAWA (1974), and far greater than the second largest, Calicut, which reported 39,000. Data from KSKTU headquarters, Alleppey. Nationwide, less than one per cent of the agricultural labourers are even nominally organised. Though a small state, Kerala accounted for 42.4 per cent of the All-Indian membership in the CPI(M) labourer union, followed at a distance by Andhra Pradesh. AIAWU (All-Indian Agricultural Workers Union), *Proceedings, Report and Resolutions*, New Delhi: P K Kunjachun, 1988, p 54.

<sup>46</sup> Compare with T J Nossiter, *Marxist State Governments in India*, London: Pinter, 1988, pp 179–80.

<sup>47</sup> Compare with P K B Nayar, 'Agrarian movements in rural development: a case study', typescript, Kariavattom: University of Kerala, 1979.

continued electoral success for the left dictates strategy locally which undermines that legislation. To take the most observable example, no labourer in Nallepilli received the legal minimum wage. District figures confirm this phenomenon (see Table 2); the declining nominal wage rate after 1975 is technically illegal. When asked what a fair wage would be, the modal response was simply, 'the government wage'. Union leaders are aware of the strategic power of landowners and of the real, though exaggerated, economic dilemma posed by higher wages and volatile product prices. Their response, congruent with the party's position, is corporatist; compromises on implementation of the KAWA are hammered out through the district Industrial Relations Committee, composed of representatives of farmers, labourers and the bureaucracy. In explicit recognition of the logic of commodity reform and electoral imperatives, the unions support the demands for higher produce prices, greater subsidies of inputs and better treatment of Kerala by Delhi in terms of investment, *regional* minimum wages, and greater fiscal flexibility for the state government. To take a poignant example, farmer opposition to funding and keeping records for the provident fund of the KAWA was accommodated by generalising the pension to all retired labourers, paid for by the state, but the programme had to be (temporarily) suspended for fiscal reasons. Taxes in Kerala as a percentage of production are already the highest in India;<sup>48</sup> deficits are chronic. The fiscal dependence of so poor a state constrains political options, regardless of the strength of local mobilisation.

Though there are countervailing dynamics, primarily the greater conscientiousness of farmers as a response to the cost-price squeeze, net productivity consequences of the stalemated class conflict are almost certainly negative (not in absolute terms, but relative to potential). Total paddy production and acreage continue to decline. The form of labour control characteristic of the 'feudal' traditional system was uniquely suited to the technical requirements of paddy agriculture. But that system combined extraordinary discipline of labour and great flexibility in its deployment with a property structure and associated social system inimical to scientific agriculture.<sup>49</sup> The most radical possibility for resolution of the stalemate, expressed by both farmers and labourers, is that 'just as the tenants got the land from landlords, the labourers will get the land from farmers'. Electoral coalition strategies

<sup>48</sup> A R Rouyer, 'Political capacity and the decline of fertility in India', *American Political Science Review* 81 (2) June 1987, p 459.

<sup>49</sup> T W Shea, *The Land Tenure Structure of Malabar and its Influence upon Capital Formation in Agriculture*, Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia, PhD Dissertation, 1959.



suggest otherwise. It is more likely that the state will continue to pick up the pieces, subsidising costs to owners and raising procurement prices, while subsidising consumption and providing old-age security for labourers. But the fiscal strain is considerable; higher paddy prices in a society of poor, politicised people inevitably means subsidising rice costs to consumers. Even if that fiscal burden can be borne, resources have opportunity costs. The state government seeks to increase off-farm employment,<sup>50</sup> but it is difficult to lure capital when labour is so well-organised, protected, militant and expensive. Indeed, capital flight is more likely than capital influx; labour-intensive industries have already experienced a significant exodus to neighbouring states.<sup>51</sup> Decisions made in Delhi are thus critical for success of the corporatist-distributionist strategy of Kerala's communists. Absent is an accumulationist strategy attuned to the intransigence and incapacity of the national state.

### Conclusions and implications

The strength of the 'moral economy' model of peasant politics lay in its extension of Karl Polanyi's great insight:<sup>52</sup> the making of market society, elevating market outcomes above the social norms in which economic relations had been previously 'embedded', produces profound dislocation and propels social forces to re-establish guarantees of economic security and morally acceptable outcomes. Moral outrage at the dislocations of market dynamics preceded the communist movement in Kerala, but it was only under communist leadership that chaotic jacqueries gave way to organised movements.<sup>53</sup> In organising around abolition

<sup>50</sup> Percentage of the district labour force in manufacturing was only 7.03 per cent in 1971, compared with a state-wide figure of 11.46 per cent. The study area is especially devoid of alternative employment, except for the periodic public works and construction. The annual increase in factory jobs over the decade was greater than the rate of population growth, but on such a small base—an average daily employment of 6964 in 1970—that most of the population increase had to be absorbed in agriculture, despite a stagnant capital base. In the Padoor sample, general immiserisation was not evident because of significant increases in off-farm employment (a match factory, infusion of investment by workers returning from West Asia—the 'mini-Gulf' phenomenon—tapioca loading, transport and so on); employment in the paddy sector exhibited the same dynamics as Nallepalli.

<sup>51</sup> M A Oommen, 'Report on the shifting of industries from Kerala', (tentative title), typescript, Trichur: Department of Economics, Calicut University, 1979; Kerala, Department of Economics and Statistics, *Report on the Survey of Unemployment in Kerala 1987*, p 7.

<sup>52</sup> K Polanyi, *The Great Transformation*, New York: Farrar & Rinehart, 1944.

<sup>53</sup> On peasant movements and communist power, see K Kannan, *Of Rural Proletarian Struggles*, pp 35–144; R Herring, 'Stealing Congress Thunder'; T. Paulini, *Agrarian Movements and Reforms in India: the case of Kerala*, Saarbrücken: Verlag Breitenbach, 1979, pp 127–325; T K Oomen, *Social Transformation in Rural India*, New Delhi: Vikas, 1984, part III and the accounts by participants and scholars cited in R Herring, 'Stealing Congress Thunder'.

of landlordism, colonial rule and social indignities, the left mobilised a powerful force which was translated into electoral strength after Independence. But as communist theoretician E M S Namboodiripad has noted, that strength was based on 'peasant' demands and anti-imperialism.<sup>54</sup> The tactical radicalism of tenant middle-peasants gave way to conservatism once their demands were met. With the end of colonialism and the transformation of peasants to Marshallian farmers, the left implicitly accepted the moral economy of market agriculture. With the dilemmas of collectivist forms well known,<sup>55</sup> and experiments in Kerala dismal, deflection of class conflict into the arena of an evolving *public* moral economy became inexorable.

The moral-economy paradigm curiously confined its logic to pre-capitalist village society, which it romanticises. That society in Palghat entailed extreme subjugation and abuse, destitution, and significant insecurity despite ideational paternalism. These very characteristics facilitated communist electoral success which completed an agrarian bourgeois revolution, producing a system of fully commoditised and largely depersonalised social relations of production, no longer embedded in connections of servitude, diffuse claims and extra-economic subjugation.

But the existence of capitalist agriculture does not guarantee the utility of neoclassical models for understanding that social formation. 'Institutionalists' and 'substantivists' among economists have a crucial point: the historical origins and institutional structure of any particular economy are vital components of its working logic. In Kerala, these institutions were, somewhat ironically, forged in the struggle against a pre-capitalist formation almost 'feudal' in character. The outcome of those conflicts imposed a public moral economy as boundaries within which the market could work, recognising the moral claims of tenants and then permanent labourers to the extent that was politically and fiscally practicable. Whereas the 'feudal' class structure was attacked frontally, the capitalist structure is regulated.

For labour, regulated capitalist agriculture has distinct and recognised advantages: most importantly, freedom from physical abuse, sexual exploitation and demeaning social observances (of dress, language, movement). Despite exposure to greater risks of unemployment, labourers value their freedom. Permanency institutionalises one of the few genuine benefits of the pre-capitalist order—some security of employment. The state-mandated agricultural involution of the KAWA

<sup>54</sup> R Herring, 'Stealing Congress Thunder', pp 396, 415.

<sup>55</sup> R Herring, *Land to the Tiller*, chapter 9.

spreads and guarantees employment to those with the strongest moral claims—the attached labourers. For casual labourers, the benefits of capitalist agriculture that are usually posited have not materialised.

Given the large size of the non-agricultural labour force, divisions of caste and religion, and the imperfect translation of class into political allegiance, electoral communism cannot risk the exclusion of farmers. The dilemma for the left is the conflict between poorly compensated capital and destitute labour. Following embourgeoisement of the tenants, recapturing the coalition of small farmers and labourers in capitalist agriculture leads inexorably to the political strategy of commodity reform movements. But sectoral politics is no real solution for the left. Benefits to labourers are of the familiar indirect and ‘trickle-down’ variety. If expanding the distributive pie is the dominant strategy, there is no reason for labourers and farmers not to join associations of the right, which are more likely to receive cooperation from Delhi. Alternative associations have expanded significantly in Palghat district and in Kerala generally.

At both state and national levels, the problematic of reconciling interests of workers and farmers has generated tactical concern, but no theoretical breakthroughs. At the Faizpur session of the newly formed All-India Kisan Sabha (Peasant Association) in 1936, N G Ranja said in his Presidential address:

It is a trite saying that the future lies with the peasants and workers struggling and suffering hand in hand for the achievement of a Socialist state. It is the sacred duty of every one of our *kisans* to fraternize with the workers and to meet them more than half way in satisfying their demands. Particular care has to be taken by our *kisan* comrades to minimize any possible conflict between *kisans* and agricultural workers by making our *kisans* grant timely and humane conditions of employment to workers. . .<sup>56</sup>

In case the *kisan* comrades did not comply, the session adopted a resolution demanding ‘statutory provision for ensuring the living wage and suitable working conditions for the agricultural labourers’.<sup>57</sup> By 1986, the All-India Agricultural Workers Union of the CPI(M) met in Palghat for only its second national conference. The delegates concluded that ‘there is a conflict of interest between sections of the peasantry and agricultural workers on the question of wages’.<sup>58</sup> ‘Even in the state of Kerala where both the peasant organization and agricultural

<sup>56</sup> M A Rasul, *A History of the All India Kisan Sabha*, Calcutta: National Book Agency, 1974, p 9.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid*, p 13.

<sup>58</sup> AIAWU (All-India Agricultural Workers Union), *Proceedings, Resolutions, Other Documents*, New Delhi: P K Kunjachan, 1986, p 57.

workers Union are a powerful force, there are occasional conflicts about conflicting demands and even straining of relations to some extent.<sup>59</sup> The solution was seen as pressing the demands of both classes simultaneously with coordinating committees to resolve differences, recognising the 'just demands of the peasantry'. But while recognising the wage conflict, and strained relations in Kerala, the representative from West Bengal argued that Bengal's labourers 'unanimously agreed' that their issues should be taken up through the peasant association until a separate organisation of labourers could be formed in the state.<sup>60</sup>

Whether the wage conflict is with the 'upper strata' of the peasantry or some (unspecified) 'sections of the peasantry',<sup>61</sup> the class analysis is not very Marxian. If profits connote surplus value extraction, the wage conflict is not with 'peasants' but with petty capitalists. The programme of the party is not to resolve or energise that class conflict, but to deflect it into demands for 'remunerative prices' and scissors politics, into the federal arena with demands for more state autonomy and resources, and into the distributive arena, where state governments attempt to shoulder the burden of subsistence guarantees. Field work and aggregate data suggest that communists in Kerala have yet to generate an accumulationist strategy; local corporatism channels class conflicts but resolves neither them nor the crisis in the paddy sector.<sup>62</sup>

Acceptance of the electoral route has inevitably distorted priorities of the party; communists in Kerala are victims of their success. Having mobilised a sufficient coalition to attain office (not power in any sense Lenin would understand), the dynamics of maintaining and servicing that coalition take precedence. Successful political parties attract opportunists and time-servers. There is enormous pressure to adapt to the routines of Indian electoral politics in which the state, not the party, is the locus of 'development' and the party is the locus of mobilising votes.<sup>63</sup> To the extent that the party forms yet another branch of Mancur Olson's distributive coalition or becomes a petty and junior partner in Bardhan's proprietary elite triangle,<sup>64</sup> the material base for

<sup>59</sup> AIAWU, *Second All-India Conference* (Palthath), New Delhi: P K Kunjachan, 1986, p 61.

<sup>60</sup> AIAWU, *Proceedings, Resolutions, Other Documents*, p 43.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid*, p 22.

<sup>62</sup> For comparable analysis of agrarian communism in West Bengal, on the issues of distributive politics and federalism, and the absence of an accumulationist strategy, see S Bandyopadhyaya and D Von Eschen, 'The impact of politics on rural production and distribution', Association for Asian Studies, Annual Meetings, San Francisco, 1988, pp 52-58.

<sup>63</sup> Compare with T J Nossiter, *Communism in Kerala*, Berkeley: University of California, 1981.

<sup>64</sup> M Olson, *The Rise and Decline of Nations*, New Haven: Yale University, 1982; P K Bardhan, *The Political Economy of Development in India*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1984.

the only non-revolutionary resolution of the class dilemmas noted above becomes impossible to attain.

Communists in Kerala have failed to make the difficult transition from a social transformational force to a force for accumulation; rather the party has become lodged in the interstices of distributive politics, attempting to fend off class conflicts which would erode its distributive position. The same can be said for the Bengal party, though its transformational role is to date more circumscribed. Rural people in Kerala see the party as a shadow of its quasi-revolutionary former self. Party activists are sincere in their defence of rights won by the rural poor, but in the context of market and electoral constraints. The difficulty of the transition is underlined by dilemmas of communist practice on a global scale: what is the place of the market in a political formation which seeks to differentiate itself from market capitalism? This question, resonating with Polanyi's concern about the 'great transformation', seems to generate more debate about China than within China, but is of universal import. In both Kerala and West Bengal, parties which take as their distinctive legitimation the eventual overthrow of capitalism are trapped in the dilemma of generating dynamism in a system of regulated capitalism. Successful communist movements in India have been instrumental in completing the agrarian bourgeois revolution, sweeping aside the more grotesque forms of bondage and social oppression in favour of the special kind of equality provided by market society and political democracy. The final dilemma is that those changes, important as they are, fall short of the aspirations of the communists' mass base.